

Final Report on FY2013 Vermont SNAP Outreach Program

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The VT Department for Children and Families (DCF), Economic Services Division (ESD) operates a statewide program to promote the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) that Vermont calls 3SquaresVT (3SVT). The goal for Vermont's 3-year outreach plan was to boost 3SVT participation to 100,000 in FY12 and to 105,000 by the end of FY14.

The FY13 outreach program involved 14 private nonprofit partner agencies. The 3SVT caseload grew from 98,821 participants in September of 2012 to 100,807 participants – or about one in six Vermonters – a year later. That September 2013 caseload included 13,302 participants age 60 or older. Participation by seniors increased at a higher rate than among the overall population – 5.5% over the last year compared to 1.5% for non-elderly participants. This may be attributable to the aging of the Baby Boomer generation and special outreach emphasis on low income seniors. Caseload growth has been driven by the persistently weak economy, expanded eligibility criteria that set the gross income limit at 185% of FPL and removed the asset test for most applicants, and a comprehensive outreach program to inform the public about the program.

Direct Client Services

Thirteen agencies – five Community Action Agencies (CAAs), five Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs), two homeless shelters and the Vermont Foodbank – provided one-on-one client assistance in the form of 3SVT information, referrals and application help. The numbers they served were significant for a small state and exceeded the annual caseload target in Vermont's 3-year plan:

- 9,492 households (unduplicated) received information, referrals or application help specific to their circumstances. Services included answering questions about 3SVT benefits, policies and procedures and helping clients fill out the application or collect required verification documents.
- 2,117 applications for 3SVT benefits were completed by workers at these agencies in FY13.

These client-focused services took place in 103 locations throughout Vermont, not counting the hundreds of home visits made to isolated Vermonters by the AAAs. The services were offered at venues familiar and accessible to low income Vermonters. Sites included 48 local agency offices or outposts, 7 Commodity Supplemental Food Program food pick-up sites, 2 shelters, 10 Headstart or parent-child centers and dozens of low income housing sites, senior centers and meal sites.

Agencies often identified direct service clients through linkages with other programs. For example, the application form CAAs use for Vermont's farmers market coupon program asked about 3SVT participation, thereby identifying 446 households in 2013 that met the gross income test but were not taking part in 3SVT. The AAAs ensure that home-delivered meal program participants know about 3SVT and help them apply if the client is interested. Mailings, media announcements and other outreach tools invite the public to contact the local direct service outreach agencies for help in learning about or applying for 3SVT benefits.

Indirect Services – Community Education

- Direct mail was one strategy. Ten of the outreach agencies issued or wrote 3SVT articles for 25 editions of paper or electronic newsletters that reached about 61,000 readers (unduplicated), including service providers (e.g., clergy, food shelves) as well as their clients and other low

income area residents. Targeted mailings were sent to 4,763 agency clients (e.g., food shelf, heating fuel or tax assistance clients) identified as potentially eligible but not receiving 3SVT benefits, as well as to 85 providers of daycare meal services to low income children.

- Hunger Free Vermont (HFVT), the remaining 3SVT outreach agency, conducted 13 training sessions that informed 422 service providers and other groups about 3SVT and strategies to increase participation by eligible persons. Events included a statewide conference sponsored by ESD and targeted to 3SVT outreach workers. Two HFVT trainings were webinars. Most were geared toward giving local service providers or other interested parties (e.g., child care or health care providers) a clearer understanding of how 3SVT works and can benefit people they serve.
- HFVT collaborated with AAAs, churches and other organizations serving seniors and senior caregivers to expand awareness and resource coordination related to nutrition issues facing low income seniors and to mobilize 3SVT benefits to improve the wellness of older Vermonters.
- Outreach workers also made 62 presentations on 3SVT topics to groups such as senior meal site participants, emergency first responders, and Headstart parent groups. They staffed 3SVT information tables at 49 public venues that included events targeted to certain groups (e.g., job seekers, seniors and senior caregivers, low wage workers), as well as at county agricultural and community health or resource fairs.
- HFVT contacted utility companies to encourage them to promote 3SVT to their customers, and sent materials to 23 of the firms. About 16,700 customers of the Burlington and Jacksonville Electric Departments received a 3SVT promotional message inserted into their utility bills.
- Nine outreach agencies used mass media strategies, including dozens of PSAs and articles sent to newspapers and radio or cable TV stations. Outreach agency staff provided 3SVT information during interviews on 19 radio or television shows. Paid ads were placed in four newspapers. Several outreach agencies have websites that include links to the vermontfoodhelp.com (see statewide initiatives below) and DCF public benefit program access websites.
- All outreach agencies distributed rack cards and other 3SVT informational materials, targeting venues frequented by potential 3SVT participants (laundromats, stores, family centers, libraries, food shelves, churches, housing sites, free clinics, etc.). Posters were displayed in 395 locations, with many including tear-off slips with phone numbers to access 3SVT information and application help. Participating agencies were urged to use items in the 3SVT outreach toolkit (see next section) to assure that current messages and information were being disseminated. For example, AAAs target senior meal sites as venues to offer materials on topics of special interest to older Vermonters, such as the medical expense deduction or the impact that a \$16 minimum benefit can have on the household food budget.
- Local agencies routinely partner with faith based organizations (FBOs) to assess area needs and to plan/coordinate services. They attend meetings of interfaith councils or clergy associations and target FBOs for newsletter mailings. Agencies provide 3SVT information to include in church bulletins and encourage FBOs to refer their members to the outreach agency.

Statewide Initiatives

- Hunger Free Vermont (HFVT) is unique among the participating 3SVT outreach agencies in that it is the only statewide agency. Therefore, its workplan is aimed at broader populations, such as electronic 3SVT newsletters to 3SVT outreach grantees and other providers. Its trainings were noted above, and the mass media activities included those initiated by or involving HFVT.
- On ESD's behalf, HFVT manages the vermontfoodhelp.com website, an interactive site that offers a range of 3SVT information, an eligibility screening calculator, an outreach resource

library and links to related sites. The site had 18,096 unique visits – the number of page views would be significantly higher as visitors explore the varied website components – in FY13, indicating that it is a useful way to introduce people to the program and provide tools to promote participation in the program by residents and outreach agencies.

- The statewide 3SVT workgroup met monthly. Its FY13 activities included planning the May outreach worker conference, updating outreach materials, and discussing other 3SVT policy or procedure issues and potential remedies. The workgroup, which is coordinated by HFVT and meets at the Vermont Foodbank, includes representatives from ESD, 3SVT outreach agencies, the Dept. of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living, VT Center for Independent Living, Vermont 2-1-1 and congressional offices. Regional FNS staff participate via teleconference, as does a SNAP expert at the national Food Research and Action Center (FRAC).
- In consultation with ESD, HFVT serves as a resource developer and clearinghouse for Vermont 3SVT outreach agencies. The workgroup maintains a Vermont outreach "toolkit" comprising various types of items (flyers, sample press releases, fact sheets regarding program policies or procedures, etc.) and posted in the vermontfoodhelp.com resource library. Its purpose is to facilitate local outreach efforts and assure that community partners are distributing current and accurate information about 3SVT. Toolkit items are vetted by ESD and the workgroup for accuracy and readability before being posted.

MAJOR CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS DEVELOPED

- In FY13, ESD continued to address high error rates generated by a combination of rapid caseload growth, budget related staff reductions, and personnel and organizational changes that were concurrent with or resulted from Tropical Storm Irene damage in late 2011. In addition to intensive trainings conducted for state agency staff, the annual outreach conference in May had several sessions targeted to error-prone issues such as earned income and allowable income deductions. The conference was aimed at a broad range of community members able to promote 3SVT participation to low income Vermonters and designed to improve their skills at helping their clients provide complete and correct information when applying for food benefits.
- Local outreach agencies experienced program reductions and staff furloughs in FY13 that were tied to sequestration of federal funds supporting other programs operated by their agencies. This was stressful and disrupted the normal flow of outreach service planning and delivery.
- The statewide workgroup and ESD staff deliberated how to inform 3SVT participants about the ripple of program changes scheduled to take place October 1 and November 1 of 2013 due to the new fiscal year and expiration of ARRA policies that had increased benefit levels. There was consensus that state and local agencies needed to be sending a common "message" to the public because inconsistent information would increase questions or concerns 3SVT participants might have about the changes. HFVT and ESD jointly developed an informational flyer focused on those changes that was used as a script by Vermont 2-1-1 staff and other outreach partners, as well as by state employees at the DCF Benefit Service Center (call center).
- Participation by eligible seniors (age 60+) has been growing, but very slowly. The workgroup developed several outreach toolkit items targeted to older Vermonters, and all of the direct service outreach agencies, not just the AAAs, serve seniors. For example, the 446 farmers market coupon applicants that CAAs identified as income-eligible for 3SVT but not participating included 310 elderly households. The Vermont Senior HelpLine is an important asset to Vermont outreach efforts. Established long ago by Vermont's AAAs, the statewide toll-free number rings at the AAA serving the Vermont region where the call originates. It is much easier

to promote 3SVT participation to Vermont seniors when a single telephone number can be used throughout the state. The FY14 outreach plan will include a new 3SVT marketing project developed by DCF whereby social media will be used to encourage seniors and senior caregivers to visit DCF's new 3SVT 60+ webpage and to call the Senior HelpLine for 3SVT information and application help. Results of that pilot project will be tracked for 6 months and used to evaluate its effectiveness as a 3SVT outreach strategy targeted to seniors.

EVALUATION METHODS AND FINDINGS

Process evaluation is incorporated into ESD grants to outreach agencies, requiring quarterly program reports that specify direct and indirect services. The "Major Accomplishments" section of this report summarizes this report data. ESD monitors subgrantee performance during the year to assess whether services are being delivered as planned.

AAAs prepared 3SVT applications for 45% of the 2,837 elderly households to whom they provided 3SVT information or referrals in FY13. Available data indicate that those applications alone generated at least \$1.4 million in 3SVT benefits for seniors. That estimate is very conservative because it is based only on the number of clients known to have received benefits after submitting applications completed by the AAA in FY13 and coded as such in the AAA client database, multiplied by the average benefit per elderly household in Vermont. The estimate excludes clients whose application outcomes were not determined or coded into the AAA database, or who successfully applied independently after being informed about the program by AAA workers.

The other eight direct service agencies were required to survey a stated minimum number of the non-participating clients they referred to the 3SVT during FY13 to determine the referral outcome. Among the 631 such clients surveyed, 22% did not apply and 15% had their applications denied, but over 59% applied and received benefits, and another 3% had applications still pending.

Furthermore, more than 76% of the clients who applied did receive benefits, and of those, 41% said they had never taken part in 3SVT (or the Food Stamp Program) before the FY13 referral. If only 76% of the 830 applications prepared by these agencies were successful, those alone would have generated nearly \$1.9 million in food benefits. Again, this is a conservative impact estimate because these non-AAA agencies provided one-on-one 3SVT information, referral and application help to 6,655 different client households, and had identified 5,421 low income households as not taking part in 3SVT when first interviewed in FY13. It is very likely that many of those 5,421 households applied for and received 3SVT benefits as a result of the outreach services but without the outreach agency completing their application forms.

The above data – reflecting only a small subset of clients – imply that application help from the 13 direct service agencies in Vermont's 3SVT outreach program generated at least \$3.3 million in food benefits for their clients. That figure is probably just a small portion of the total food benefits for low income Vermonters that result from their outreach services. It disregards the hundreds of 3SVT application forms sent to targeted clients, many whom may have applied as a result, as well as Vermonters who may have applied after attending a 3SVT presentation, getting program materials from an exhibit table, visiting the vermontfoodhelp.com website or reading about the program and responding to the messages to apply online or call the DCF Benefits Service Center directly.

Report Prepared by: Mary Carlson, Food & Nutrition Program Coordinator
Vermont DCF Economic Services Division
103 South Main Street / Waterbury, VT 05671-1201
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- Local outreach agencies experienced program reductions and staff furloughs in FY13 that were tied to sequestration of federal funds supporting other programs operated by their agencies. This was stressful and disrupted the normal flow of outreach service planning and delivery.
- The statewide workgroup and ESD staff deliberated how to inform 3SVT participants about the ripple of program changes scheduled to take place October 1 and November 1 of 2013 due to the new fiscal year and expiration of ARRA policies that had increased benefit levels. There was consensus that state and local agencies needed to be sending a common "message" to the public because inconsistent information would increase questions or concerns 3SVT participants might have about the changes. HFVT and ESD jointly developed an informational flyer focused on those changes that was used as a script by Vermont 2-1-1 staff and other outreach partners, as well as by state employees at the DCF Benefit Service Center (call center).
- Participation by eligible seniors (age 60+) has been growing, but very slowly. The workgroup developed several outreach toolkit items targeted to older Vermonters, and all of the direct service outreach agencies, not just the AAAs, serve seniors. For example, the 446 farmers market coupon applicants that CAAs identified as income-eligible for 3SVT but not participating included 310 elderly households. The Vermont Senior HelpLine is an important asset to Vermont outreach efforts. Established long ago by Vermont's AAAs, the statewide toll-free number rings at the AAA serving the Vermont region where the call originates. It is much easier

to promote 3SVT participation to Vermont seniors when a single telephone number can be used throughout the state. The FY14 outreach plan will include a new 3SVT marketing project developed by DCF whereby social media will be used to encourage seniors and senior caregivers to visit DCF's new 3SVT 60+ webpage and to call the Senior HelpLine for 3SVT information and application help. Results of that pilot project will be tracked for 6 months and used to evaluate its effectiveness as a 3SVT outreach strategy targeted to seniors.

EVALUATION METHODS AND FINDINGS

Process evaluation is incorporated into ESD grants to outreach agencies, requiring quarterly program reports that specify direct and indirect services. The "Major Accomplishments" section of this report summarizes this report data. ESD monitors subgrantee performance during the year to assess whether services are being delivered as planned.

AAAs prepared 3SVT applications for 45% of the 2,837 elderly households to whom they provided 3SVT information or referrals in FY13. Available data indicate that those applications alone generated at least \$1.4 million in 3SVT benefits for seniors. That estimate is very conservative because it is based only on the number of clients known to have received benefits after submitting applications completed by the AAA in FY13 and coded as such in the AAA client database, multiplied by the average benefit per elderly household in Vermont. The estimate excludes clients whose application outcomes were not determined or coded into the AAA database, or who successfully applied independently after being informed about the program by AAA workers.

The other eight direct service agencies were required to survey a stated minimum number of the non-participating clients they referred to the 3SVT during FY13 to determine the referral outcome. Among the 631 such clients surveyed, 22% did not apply and 15% had their applications denied, but over 59% applied and received benefits, and another 3% had applications still pending.

Furthermore, more than 76% of the clients who applied did receive benefits, and of those, 41% said they had never taken part in 3SVT (or the Food Stamp Program) before the FY13 referral. If only 76% of the 830 applications prepared by these agencies were successful, those alone would have generated nearly \$1.9 million in food benefits. Again, this is a conservative impact estimate because these non-AAA agencies provided one-on-one 3SVT information, referral and application help to 6,655 different client households, and had identified 5,421 low income households as not taking part in 3SVT when first interviewed in FY13. It is very likely that many of those 5,421 households applied for and received 3SVT benefits as a result of the outreach services but without the outreach agency completing their application forms.

The above data – reflecting only a small subset of clients – imply that application help from the 13 direct service agencies in Vermont's 3SVT outreach program generated at least \$3.3 million in food benefits for their clients. That figure is probably just a small portion of the total food benefits for low income Vermonters that result from their outreach services. It disregards the hundreds of 3SVT application forms sent to targeted clients, many whom may have applied as a result, as well as Vermonters who may have applied after attending a 3SVT presentation, getting program materials from an exhibit table, visiting the vermontfoodhelp.com website or reading about the program and responding to the messages to apply online or call the DCF Benefits Service Center directly.

Report Prepared by: Mary Carlson, Food & Nutrition Program Coordinator
Vermont DCF Economic Services Division
103 South Main Street / Waterbury, VT 05671-1201
mary.carlson@state.vt.us

Final Report on FY2013 Vermont SNAP Outreach Program

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The VT Department for Children and Families (DCF), Economic Services Division (ESD) operates a statewide program to promote the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) that Vermont calls 3SquaresVT (3SVT). The goal for Vermont's 3-year outreach plan was to boost 3SVT participation to 100,000 in FY12 and to 105,000 by the end of FY14.

The FY13 outreach program involved 14 private nonprofit partner agencies. The 3SVT caseload grew from 98,821 participants in September of 2012 to 100,807 participants – or about one in six Vermonters – a year later. That September 2013 caseload included 13,302 participants age 60 or older. Participation by seniors increased at a higher rate than among the overall population – 5.5% over the last year compared to 1.5% for non-elderly participants. This may be attributable to the aging of the Baby Boomer generation and special outreach emphasis on low income seniors. Caseload growth has been driven by the persistently weak economy, expanded eligibility criteria that set the gross income limit at 185% of FPL and removed the asset test for most applicants, and a comprehensive outreach program to inform the public about the program.

Direct Client Services

Thirteen agencies – five Community Action Agencies (CAAs), five Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs), two homeless shelters and the Vermont Foodbank – provided one-on-one client assistance in the form of 3SVT information, referrals and application help. The numbers they served were significant for a small state and exceeded the annual caseload target in Vermont's 3-year plan:

- 9,492 households (unduplicated) received information, referrals or application help specific to their circumstances. Services included answering questions about 3SVT benefits, policies and procedures and helping clients fill out the application or collect required verification documents.
- 2,117 applications for 3SVT benefits were completed by workers at these agencies in FY13.

These client-focused services took place in 103 locations throughout Vermont, not counting the hundreds of home visits made to isolated Vermonters by the AAAs. The services were offered at venues familiar and accessible to low income Vermonters. Sites included 48 local agency offices or outposts, 7 Commodity Supplemental Food Program food pick-up sites, 2 shelters, 10 Headstart or parent-child centers and dozens of low income housing sites, senior centers and meal sites.

Agencies often identified direct service clients through linkages with other programs. For example, the application form CAAs use for Vermont's farmers market coupon program asked about 3SVT participation, thereby identifying 446 households in 2013 that met the gross income test but were not taking part in 3SVT. The AAAs ensure that home-delivered meal program participants know about 3SVT and help them apply if the client is interested. Mailings, media announcements and other outreach tools invite the public to contact the local direct service outreach agencies for help in learning about or applying for 3SVT benefits.

Indirect Services – Community Education

- Direct mail was one strategy. Ten of the outreach agencies issued or wrote 3SVT articles for 25 editions of paper or electronic newsletters that reached about 61,000 readers (unduplicated), including service providers (e.g., clergy, food shelves) as well as their clients and other low

income area residents. Targeted mailings were sent to 4,763 agency clients (e.g., food shelf, heating fuel or tax assistance clients) identified as potentially eligible but not receiving 3SVT benefits, as well as to 85 providers of daycare meal services to low income children.

- Hunger Free Vermont (HFVT), the remaining 3SVT outreach agency, conducted 13 training sessions that informed 422 service providers and other groups about 3SVT and strategies to increase participation by eligible persons. Events included a statewide conference sponsored by ESD and targeted to 3SVT outreach workers. Two HFVT trainings were webinars. Most were geared toward giving local service providers or other interested parties (e.g., child care or health care providers) a clearer understanding of how 3SVT works and can benefit people they serve.
- HFVT collaborated with AAAs, churches and other organizations serving seniors and senior caregivers to expand awareness and resource coordination related to nutrition issues facing low income seniors and to mobilize 3SVT benefits to improve the wellness of older Vermonters.
- Outreach workers also made 62 presentations on 3SVT topics to groups such as senior meal site participants, emergency first responders, and Headstart parent groups. They staffed 3SVT information tables at 49 public venues that included events targeted to certain groups (e.g., job seekers, seniors and senior caregivers, low wage workers), as well as at county agricultural and community health or resource fairs.
- HFVT contacted utility companies to encourage them to promote 3SVT to their customers, and sent materials to 23 of the firms. About 16,700 customers of the Burlington and Jacksonville Electric Departments received a 3SVT promotional message inserted into their utility bills.
- Nine outreach agencies used mass media strategies, including dozens of PSAs and articles sent to newspapers and radio or cable TV stations. Outreach agency staff provided 3SVT information during interviews on 19 radio or television shows. Paid ads were placed in four newspapers. Several outreach agencies have websites that include links to the vermontfoodhelp.com (see statewide initiatives below) and DCF public benefit program access websites.
- All outreach agencies distributed rack cards and other 3SVT informational materials, targeting venues frequented by potential 3SVT participants (laundromats, stores, family centers, libraries, food shelves, churches, housing sites, free clinics, etc.). Posters were displayed in 395 locations, with many including tear-off slips with phone numbers to access 3SVT information and application help. Participating agencies were urged to use items in the 3SVT outreach toolkit (see next section) to assure that current messages and information were being disseminated. For example, AAAs target senior meal sites as venues to offer materials on topics of special interest to older Vermonters, such as the medical expense deduction or the impact that a \$16 minimum benefit can have on the household food budget.
- Local agencies routinely partner with faith based organizations (FBOs) to assess area needs and to plan/coordinate services. They attend meetings of interfaith councils or clergy associations and target FBOs for newsletter mailings. Agencies provide 3SVT information to include in church bulletins and encourage FBOs to refer their members to the outreach agency.

Statewide Initiatives

- Hunger Free Vermont (HFVT) is unique among the participating 3SVT outreach agencies in that it is the only statewide agency. Therefore, its workplan is aimed at broader populations, such as electronic 3SVT newsletters to 3SVT outreach grantees and other providers. Its trainings were noted above, and the mass media activities included those initiated by or involving HFVT.
- On ESD's behalf, HFVT manages the vermontfoodhelp.com website, an interactive site that offers a range of 3SVT information, an eligibility screening calculator, an outreach resource

library and links to related sites. The site had 18,096 unique visits – the number of page views would be significantly higher as visitors explore the varied website components – in FY13, indicating that it is a useful way to introduce people to the program and provide tools to promote participation in the program by residents and outreach agencies.

- The statewide 3SVT workgroup met monthly. Its FY13 activities included planning the May outreach worker conference, updating outreach materials, and discussing other 3SVT policy or procedure issues and potential remedies. The workgroup, which is coordinated by HFVT and meets at the Vermont Foodbank, includes representatives from ESD, 3SVT outreach agencies, the Dept. of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living, VT Center for Independent Living, Vermont 2-1-1 and congressional offices. Regional FNS staff participate via teleconference, as does a SNAP expert at the national Food Research and Action Center (FRAC).
- In consultation with ESD, HFVT serves as a resource developer and clearinghouse for Vermont 3SVT outreach agencies. The workgroup maintains a Vermont outreach "toolkit" comprising various types of items (flyers, sample press releases, fact sheets regarding program policies or procedures, etc.) and posted in the vermontfoodhelp.com resource library. Its purpose is to facilitate local outreach efforts and assure that community partners are distributing current and accurate information about 3SVT. Toolkit items are vetted by ESD and the workgroup for accuracy and readability before being posted.

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